Stubborn Stuart Was Manager in Thought, But Efficient Bertha Won by Strategy.

HIS DEAR CASSANDRA

BY HOLWORTHY HALL

WHEN Picard, at twenty-four, deserted the insurance business to go on the stage, his friends in the home office gave him a testimonial dinner at a dollar and a half a plate, and to conclude the dinner they naturally required Picard to make a speech. Picard stood up, flexed his jaw and said exactly what was on his mind.

"Fellows," he said, "I may never be the greatest actor in the world, and I don't expect to be; but I do expect to make a reputation for myself, and I do expect to get a little power, sooner or later, because I'll work. And the first time I'm back on Broadway I'll have a dinner in memory of this one—and in memory of what the encouragement of you fellows has meant to me." Then he gave them "The Heathen Chinee" to laugh at, and Whittier's "Marguerite" to cry at, and Hamlet's soliloquy to wonder about; and after he had finished there was nothing more for his friends to do except to leave a little something for the waiters and escort Picard over to the Grand Central terminal. There, in the train shed, all but one of them prophesied to Picard that he would quickly repeat, on the legitimate stage, his immense success in amateur dramatics.

The toastmaster of the evening had been a man named Benham, a reader of serious books and a shepherd of all his companions, and Benham and Picard were known to be inseparable. At the last minute, when they were shaking hands, Benham suddenly lost color.

"Stuart," he said, awkwardly, "we've been pretty good pals; I can't let you go without telling you one thing. I haven't talked about it before, because I knew it wouldn't be any use. You're so stubborn. You've had this offer, and now you can't see anything else. You can't see that you're throwing away a big business career—an absolutely sure thing, too, because all of us realize that you're the ablest one of the crowd—for this—this gamble."

Picard's grip tightened, but his jaw was prominent. "You really didn't need to mention it," he said, constrained. "I've known all along. You just don't believe the Lord ever intended me to be an actor."

Benham wet his lips and nodded. His anxiety always to be honest, even if his honesty happened to hurt somebody, had made him hurt Picard at a time when honesty wasn't in the least demanded. "You see, you're never open to conviction, Stuart."

"Not by argument—no, I'm not."

His friend Benham kicked at a concrete pillar. "I can't help feeling the way I do about your acting, but maybe I'm only selfish. I hate to think what the office is going to be like when you're gone. And I'm afraid of the gamble. I'm afraid it'll spoil you and sour you. And I swear I hope I'm wrong about the whole thing."

But I know perfectly well you don't want to be an actor always—you just want distinction, and power, and money. And you could get them easier, and quicker, and surer, if you stayed right here with the rest of us."

"No, I couldn't. Nobody could. Fifteen years from now you'll be one of the people who'll look at me, and wonder why nothing interesting ever happened to you. You're right in one respect, though—I want distinction, and power, and money; but I want to get 'em in an interesting way. Something to do with drama. I'm sorry you think I won't."

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BENHAM lifted his head and met Picard's eyes. "Well—if you should ever want to come back to us again there'll always be a place for you as long as I'm there. Maybe you'll never want to come. Maybe your stubbornness is just what'll make your fortune, somehow or other. And if this is what you really want, why, then, no matter what my private opinion is, I'll give up anything I've got in the whole world to help you succeed."

"I know you would," said Picard, deeply stirred. "And you're the only man in the world I'll ever take anything from, if I change my mind."

Then his other friends pounced down upon him, and put him aboard the Mohawk Valley special; and in the morning he reported to the manager of a second-rate stock company and went to work.

When he left New York he had regarded his company with tolerant contempt; he knew that it was a cheap company, but it had offered to give him an impetus on the long road to glory, and he reminded himself that because a man determines to go to Paris, he needn't be ashamed of the necessity of passing through Dover. Within twenty-four hours, however, he had sloughed off the last of his illusions, and perceived that even in Dover—to continue the metaphor—he appeared like a clumsy rustic. He had never conceived himself as a genius, but he had relied upon his energetic ambition and his common sense, and it bruised his self-respect to be considered a blockhead. Some men might have resented the epithet by a display of fists; Pickard resented it by devoting eighteen hours a day toward making it inapplicable.

It was only a few months ago that he had starred as "Crichton" in the greatest of all the Comedy Club productions, and now he was estimated too wooden to be allowed to walk on as the messenger in "Mrs. Temple's Telegram." He shuddered to realize that while he had been a petted amateur and the recipient of praise which hardly stopped short of comparison with Gillette and Drew, he had been ignorant of the simplest fundamentals of the profession. He was successively chagrined, dazed, humbled and despondent; indeed, except for that paramount stubbornness of his, he would certainly have deserted the stage at the end of the first week and gone limping back to the insurance business. As it was, he wrote Benham that it took more intelligence to be a bad actor than it did to be a good insurance solicitor, and Benham knew that it was futile to argue with him.

By the end of the second week of diligent labor Picard found himself faintly encouraged, because the director had stopped yelling at him about his hands and feet. By the end of the month he had begun to carry himself with a mildly deprecating assurance. He had a splendid figure and a pleasant face, and a voice which would have won him chevrons in the Army; he learned to handle small and foolproof parts with some facility, and by midseason he was at least a credit to his salary. More than that, he had acquired a slight following of local flappers, which means money in the box office for a stock company, and when he got his first letter from a vapid schoolgirl he wouldn't have exchanged places with Sir Henry Irving. He spent his spare time in reading plays and studying plays and devouring library books about playwriting and the history of the theater; and if ever he could have translated his knowledge into his performances he would have been a greater man than even the hero of his ambitions.

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BENHAM'S letters were a poultice to his vanity, but office routine and office gossip had never seemed so basically uninteresting, and Picard was presently aware that he was sorry for Benham. He was sorry for every one who was tethered to a desk or employed in any profession less fascinating than his own. He never remotely suspected that Benham's appraisal of him was absolutely sound, and that the Lord had never intended him to be an actor.

When the season was over, he contrived to get himself a place in summer stock at Portland Harbor, where the tourist buys a round-trip trolley ticket and a reserved seat in the orchestra, all for 60 cents; and in the autumn he was re-engaged, at a better price, for the Mohawk valley. If he had been less innocent of the stage, he might have been suspicious of promotion; for it stood to reason that no man of Picard's shallow training was equipped to play juvenile leads. But he played them, and he worked hard and ffaithfully; always studying and reading, and struggling to discover what were the elements of a good play and of a good interpretation of a part, and the harder he worked the easier he found it to lose contact with Benham. Then notice went up, and the company disbanded, and Picard made his first acquaintance with the fact that some theatrical contracts have only one side.

His earliest reaction was of pugnacity; so that he rushed to a lawyer, and talked excitedly about enforcing his rights. It took a lawyer half a day to persuade him that a suit against a bankrupt is a waste of energy; but when Picard finally got the axiom into his head he slowly perceived that he could even use the misfortune as a stepping-stone. His literary knowledge of stagecraft was becoming profound, his constant study had given him a certain sense of authority, and he perceived that it might actually be a blessing to him to hunt for experience in a broader field.

Now the stage depends for its permanence not upon the few distinguished artists whose names are written large upon the billing, but upon the consistently steady average of their support. Picard was just good enough to make himself as quietly inconspicuous as a piece of furniture, and this ability proved to have a marketable worth. He went on the road with a triumphant farce, and he was admittedly the best informed and also the poorest actor in the cast. Subsequeuntly he was hired to support a repertory queen who didn't expect to be overshadowed by any of her subjects, and after that he filled a stock engagement in Vancouver. His salary had now risen until it equaled his last salary in the insurance office, but Picard's jaw was quite as firm as ever, and his fund of dramatic information was voluminous. He had never left off craving for distinction and command, and he had never forgotten the old platitude that knowledge is power; but somehow his craving and his labor and the platitude couldn't ever seem to coincide. As a matter of fact, when he had lost his original uncertainty, which had appealed especially to women as a native and lovable shyness, he had lost the only hold that he would ever have upon an audience.

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FROM Vancouver he dirtied down the coast to San Francisco, and east to Denver for two busy seasons, and cast again to Chicago, still in stock, and just as he finished his second season in Chicago a New York manager happened to see him in a glove-fitting part, and overappreciated him, and brought him back to Broadway at $300 a week, to play in a comedy which was destined to run all summer. Picard arrived in the metropolis at 11 in the morning, and at the quarter-hour he had sent in his card to Benham.

The formalities of the occasion amused him, but, at the same time, they impressed him. A uniformed page delivered him over to a pretty girl in a snug anteroom, and the girl took his card and disappeared through a door which gave glimpses of polished mahogany. When she returned she said that Mr. Benham was in conference, but would probably be free within twenty minutes.

"I haven't seen him for eight years," said Picard, "or heard from him for six. What is he now, anyway?"

"He's fourth vice president," said the girl, casually.

The revelation took Picard's breath away; he sat down hard, and stared at the lithographed calendars on the wall. He wondered how long ago it was that he had fallen into the habit of being sorry for Benham. To be sure, Benham must be thirty-six, while Picard was only thirty-two, and yet, eight years ago, they had worked side by side on a common footing. Picard's immediate grandeur was ggently shaken by the thought that his friend had acquired power by staying at home.

"He must be on the board of directors, then, too," he said.

The secretary nodded, without looking up. "Yes, he is."

Picard was speculating whether a fourth vice president got very much more than three hundred dollars a week. "Where does he live now?"

"In Greenwich, Connecticut."

Picard scowled at the calendars, and wished that he had worn a different suit. Then suddenly the door swung open, and Benham was on the threshold, and Picard forgot the silent years which had gone between them.

Over the luncheon table Benham dismissed the past in a dozen sentences; and outlined the future in a phrase or two. "Yes," he said, "I suppose some day I'll be pretty near the top. Next year, unless I fall down pretty hard somewhere, I'm likely to be that particular dog called second v-p and general manager. Of course, I'm thirty-six, and I've been here ever since I was sixteen. * * * But if you'd stayed with us, Stuart, you'd have gone up faster than I have. They all said so. I say so myself."

"That's nice," said Picard absently. "Do you ever wish I'd persuaded you to stay?"

"You couldn't have," said Picard, and sighed reminiscently.

Benham laughed. "You're stubborn as ever, Stuart. Tell me, are you satisfied with your success? Have you got all the prestige and so-on you wanted—or do you see it in sight?"

"I haven't changed my mind yet, anyway," said Picard, but he did change the subject, because he feared that Benham might possibly choose to be honest again. Picard knew very well that his name was far from being a household word, but he wasn't anxious for Benham to tell him so. "By the way, that's a mighty nice girl you've got in your office."

Benham raised his head. "Miss Carpenter? She's a girl in a hundred. I simply couldn't get along without her.

"She's got the finest business judgment, and the keenest judgment of people——"

"Oh, nonsense!" said Picard, with a grimace. "I use to be in the insurance game myself. There isn't a woman in the world who's got any business judgment. Some of 'em may have enough personality, or magnetism, or whatever you call it, to get away with murder, but I don't call that business judgment."

Benham gave another laugh. "Aren't you open to conviction any more than you use to be?"

"Not on main principles. I've seen a good bit of life since the old days, and I-knows what I knows,—and I knows women. That reminds me * * * are you married yet?"

"Not yet," said Benham, cautiously.

"Prospects?"

"Dim, but favorable."

"No one I know, I suppose?"

"No one you really know," said Benham gravely.

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THEY parted on the best of terms, and Benham agreed to see the show as soon as possible, and Picard mentioned his desire to redeem his pledge and give a testimonial banquet to those of his friends who still remained in the insurance office. He couldn't refrain from being a wee bit lordly about it; but afterward he was pentinent, because he knew that he hadn't yet done anything to be lordly—or even modest—about.

He had been engaged to replace in a comedy which had already run for a hundred nights an eminent star who was entitled to a vacation. It was a brilliant opportunity for Picard; the job was temporary, but he knew that if he handled it well, it meant a season on the road at the head of the second company, and after that the sky for a perspective. He knew that he needed only a single victory on Broadway to put his income on a level with Benham's and his fame on a level infinitely higher. Picard wasn't exactly jealous of Benham, but in view of what had befallen both of them, he was inclined to be a little jealous of himself. He rejoiced that Benham had done so extraordinarily well, but he was also disturbed by what Benham had said about Picard's own squandered chances in the insurance business. Benham was already an executive, and Picard owned scarcely two thousand dollars in the bank; but here at last was the crossroad where the traffic regulations allowed the worm to turn. He told himself that under no conditions would he ever permit himself to gloat over Benham; but he would dearly love to put himself in such a position that he could gloat if he wanted to.

He went twice to the office to see Benham, and on both occasions he had to wait, but he pleasantly employed the interval in chatting with Benham's pretty secretary. Later, he expressed to Benham the utter idiocy of claiming that any girl with a face like that could possess any commercial acumen whatsoever. Incidentally, he added that she didn't need it.

"She's an awfully nice girl, though," said Picard, with his eyes on vacancy. "I'd like to meet her mother."

"You'd have to," said Benham, after a pause, and then he remarked, thoughtfully: "If you're serious, why, I dare say it could be arranged. You might even send 'em a couple of tickets for your show. If you sent 'em through me I guess it would be all right."

Accordingly Picard sent the tickets, and when he went on for the first time Miss Carpenter and her mother were in front. Benham was also in front, together will all the available office friends of eight years ago. They applauded him vigorously—once he even had to take a second bow—and yet afterward he was vaguely conscious that somewhere he had missed his opportunity. He gave the dinner, and his old friends were highly complimentary—all but Benham, who was judicially silent—but Picard's mind was glued to the morning newspapers, so that he made himself a fairly indifferent host.

The stage director had merely said to him, "You did all right;" but the best of the morning notices said that Picard's performance never arose above the standard of a stock company, and when he remembered that for such a comment he had slaved and studied through the tedium of eight long years, he wished that he had forgotten his promise to give the dinner. The only consolation was that he hadn't bragged to Benham.

He was permitted to call on the Carpenters; and the privilege carried with it a genuine welcome. He was a gentleman and he was a friend of Mr. Benham's, and he talked easily and entertainingly. They hoped that he would come to see them often; and Picard had already begun to chafe because he could come so seldom—because Miss Carpenter was busy in the afternoons, while he nimself was busy in the evenings. But it soon appeared that all three of them were fond of the open country, and dating from that discovery Picard was radiantly content. He took them, on those summer Sundays, far up into the nills of Westchester, where they had picnics, and disregarded all the no trespass signs, and Picard and Miss Carpenter found it convenient to call each other by their first names.

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THEY were the happiest Sundays he had ever known, but the week days were increasingly clouded by that same vague consciousness of something missed. To be sure, he was drawing his salary, and he was getting a respectable number of laughs, but he was nevertheless uncomfortable. In the presence of his associates he felt curiously like an alien; he felt as though they regarded him as a wet blanket upon their own accomplishments. And while he suffered from this introspection, he was not at all desirous of seeing too much of his friend Benham.

In the second act he had a ten-minute wait, and usually he ran up to his dressing room for the forbidden cigarette, lighting his match, with perversive humor, upon the warning placard issued by the fire commissioner. One evening, however, just as he reached the iron stairway, the cigarette was suddenly undesirable to him, and he came back slowly and lurked behind the leg-drop, yawning and waiting. As he stood there the murmuring voices of the stage director and of the leading woman, who owned a part of the show, came clearly to his ears. They were barely arm's-length distance from him, concealed by an angle of canvas; they thought that Picard was safe upstairs in his dressing room.

"Stuart's flopping," said the woman, without animus. "Oh, he tries hard enough, but when a man can't read his lines and can't act, what's the sense of paying him $300 a week to be a cigar-store Indian? Every time he goes on he slows up the action like an emergency brake."

The director murmured a response and the woman spoke again. "Well, I think we've found a man, finally, and I'm going to see that Stuart gets his notice tomorrow. I'm sort of sorry for him, too. If he wasn't so pig-headed he might learn to be a fairly decent actor. The funny part of it is that off the stage he looks like an actor and talks like an actor. Funny, isn't it?"

Picard's hands went clammy and for an instant his world was blank. The voices dwindled off toward the down-stage entrance; Picard drew a long, tremulous breath, and began to think; and it was significant that before he thought of the personal consequences of his failure he thought of what Miss Carpenter would say about it, and of what Benham, in his more mature diplomacy, might refrain from saying. Then, when he visualized the goal which had eluded him—the leadership of the second company next season and the return to Broadway as a star in his own right; the prestige and the salary and the influence—when he visualized all this, Picard was ghastly white beneath his make-up. Automatically he roused himself at his cue, but he went on only to butcher the best scene in the play, and when he came off he was fully as angry as the girl who had played opposite him.

He got his notice, but he didn't tell Benham about it. On Sunday he told Miss Carpenter, and was strengthened by her sympathy and concern.

"If I were in your place——" she began, but Picard interrupted her.

"Please don't!" he said, downcast. "I don't want any advice; all I want is to be near you and feel that I can talk to you. There's nothing much I can do now, anyway. It's off-season. I'll take a rest until next month, when they begin signing up for the fall productions."

It was a comfort to him during this interval to be able to spend some of his evenings with the Carpenters. His worries hadn't softened his character, but they had made him very much more susceptible; so that perhaps his spirit had never been so restless as in this period consecrated to rest.

When the calendar was favorable he went to the best of the agents, and, although the man received him well enough, he grinned spontaneously at the suggestion of $300 a week. "I can put you in a Middlemass piece for a hundred and seventy-five, all right," he said. "That is—it's open."

"A good part?"

"The heavy," said his agent. "It's a shop play. The heavy's supposed to be a bad actor—I guess you can do it all right, if you don't make it too realistic."

Picard winced, but he signed his name to a contract, and spent a reeking fortnight in rehearsal at Bryant Hall, before the influenza reached out for him and caught him. When he was on his feet once more—and this was late in October—his savings account was out squarely in half and an infinitely better man had taken his place in the Middlemass production. Eventually, because no higher terms were thrust upon him, he consented to receive a hundred and fifty in another play, which captivated Stamford on the try-out, but endured for precisely six nights in the metropolis before the men from Cane's came up to cart away the scenery to the storehouse.

"Sometimes," he said moodily to Miss Carpenter, "I wonder if that isn't where I ought to go, too—to Cane's."

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PICARD was getting demoralised. He was offered a hundred, and scornfully refused it; offered a hundred and twenty for stock, and refused it—changed his mind and went back too late—and knew that it had been a double error to go back at all. He was offered ninety, and snapped at it, just for a stop-gap; but the director released him on the third day. It was now half a year since he had enjoyed an income, and in the meantime his capital had dwindled almost to the vanishing point. Abruptly he sensed that, as a sweeping generality, he wasn't wanted. He was capable of giving lectures on dramatic composition and the technique of the modern play, but nobody wanted him to illustrate his education. One manager told him to his face that he wasn't good enough to go out with a second company to play the cities; and another told him that he was wasting time when he tried to get an engagement from anybody who had ever seen him act.

It was known on the Rialto, of course, that Stuart Picard was out of an engagement; and as soon as it was known that this condition was practically chronic, his value sank to a fractional part of his needs. The same agent who had put him into the Middlemass production was the man who gave him the ultimate insult.

"I could use you—yes," said the agent, gazing into space. "There's a piece by somebody or other—Lasky's putting it on—there's a good part in it for you. Sort of high brow. Modern. Nothing to buy—you could dress the part with what you've got on. But it only pays fifty a week. Strictly between you and me, I'd advise you to take it."

Picard stood up, shaking. "I've been on the stage for eight years——"

"Solid ivory," said the agent, without a smile. "Want the part?"

"No!" said Picard, and went out, convulsed with wrath, and utter degradation.

It was half-past one on Saturday, and all the Rialto swarmed with stage acquaintances. He didn't even see them; indeed, as far as his objective mind was involved, he was the only individual on earth. He had no definite plan of action; no purpose; no desires; he was numbed by a freezing conviction, not brought to him by any outside argument, but by the force of sheer experience, that the Lord had never intended him to be a great actor. The managers and the agents all concurred. There was no road open to him now, except the road to the small towns; there was no dramatic future left to him, except a galling existence among the colorless failures of his own kind. And he knew more about the stage, and about the art and science of it, than any man or woman he had ever met. But he was convinced—convinced—convinced!

He awoke to find himself loitering before Miss Carpenter's apartment house; and as he paused, irresolute, his friend Benham came down the steps. Picard's face went crimson with shame and envy.

"Stuart!" said Benham, and took him by the arm.

"Well?" There leaped to Picard's brain an inspiration. It was too late to satisfy his dreams of power and glory behind the footlights, but it wasn't too late to acknowledge his defects, and to remind Benham of his ancient covenant. Benham had said that Picard would have traveled faster than even Benham had done. Well, Benham was in authority; let Benham give him a foothold.

"Stuart, do you remember the night you went away? When we gave you a dinner? And you and I had a word together at the train?" asked Benham.

"I—I was just thinking about that."

"I said I'd give anything I had in the whole world to help you succeed."

"Yes, you did. And I said——"

Benham's mouth was drawn. "Well, I've done it, Stuart."

"Done what?"

"Given up—everything." He was breathing hard, but Picard had no visual perceptions.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, wearily.

"Then go upstairs," said Benham. "Go up and find out. I had a chance—I had the best chance until you came along, Stuart. And now I'm out of it. She's just told me so. She's just told me there's somebody else. And that means you." His grasp made Picard flinch. "You don't deserve her, Stuart. You don't appreciate her—you don't half appreciate her—and I do. I always have. That's what hurts the worst. If it only could have been a man who appreciates what she is—what her brain is—what her heart is—what her soul is—what her judgment is—but you! With your damned stubborn old-fashioned ideas about women!" He tried to control himself, and failed. "Go on upstairs, you lucky fool," said Benham, with difficulty, "and I hope to God I never set eyes on you again as long as I live!"

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STUPIDLY, Picard watched him turn the corner. Stupidly, Picard went into the apartment house and climbed two floors and rang a bell. The door opened to him and he shut it behind him and put his back against it; and he made his declaration there in the hallway, for Mrs. Carpenter was audible in the living room.

"Bertha," he said, unsteadily, "I'm broke, and I'm tired out, and I'm discouraged—but won't you please marry me, anyway?"

Although Bertha had insisted and her mother had insisted that in all common sense they must delay the wedding until Picard was on his feet again, he overpowered them both with his dynamic stubbornness. Bertha had used the word "judgment," but it was the wrong word for any woman to use to Picard. With his eloquence and his masculine superiority he crushed her, magnifying the import of his bank balance, until she weakly agreed with him that his few hundred dollars were in the nature of a generous endowment. Furthermore, now that he had taken responsibilities upon himself, he would arrange immediately to finance the responsibilities. As a matter of fact, even though Benham was eliminated from his list of prospective angels, Picard had an alternative of propositions. If he chose he could go out in a vaudeville sketch at $80 a week; but he preferred to go to work instead for an old acquaintance, a curb broker, at $50.

Bertha was contemplative. "It seems to me," she said, "that after you've invested eight years in one profession you ought to think pretty carefully before you throw away all that investment. Of course, I'm not awfully anxious to have you keep on being an actor, but when you've learned so much about the stage—and there's so many different phases of it—I should think you'd want to find some place where your knowledge would help you get ahead. We can't very well be much poorer than we are now, can we? Then why start in a business that's so absolutely new to you? You could get just as much money in something to do with the stage—not necessarily acting—and have a future. You know a lot about the mechanics of plays; why don't you see if you can't get a position that's got something to do with managing?"

Picard kissed her indulgently. "I'm never convinced by argument," he said, "only by experience. I'm quitting the stage. I've got my reasons. Your problem is to figure out where we're going to live."

Bertha glanced up at him in amazement. "Why — here, aren't we? Mother and I have a long lease, and it's a very favorable lease, too, and we've got all our furniture here, and—and everything. I don't see what else there is to do."

Picard shook his head. "That isn't good judgment. I'm afraid it wouldn't work. Your mother's a corker, and I'm awfully fond of her and all that, but I want us to be by ourselves. And this place is really crowded now. A cat could hardly walk around here and keep from stumbling. I want my own establishment."

"But if you won't let me keep on working for a while, Stuart—and that's the onyy sensible thing to do—why, how can we afford to live anywhere else? Now, my plan——"

He kissed her again with imperturbable confidence. "What does a little girl like you know about it? I'm the business man, Bertha. You're the rest of it."

Bertha, who in a day had exercised jurisdiction over more money than Picard would earn in all his life, flushed vividly.

"Mr. Benham used to say I was a girl in a hundred, Stuart."

She wanted recognition, and Picard gave her a compliment.

"Benham was conservative. I say you're a girl in two billion—if that's what the population of the earth is. But you're not marrying Benham, are you? * * * No, dear, I do love you, but I'm marrying you because I want to protect you and take care of you, and I'm going to do it, too."

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HE was the apotheosis of affection, and of kindness, but it wounded her to realize that he could so calmly discount her greatest ability. This was her elementary lesson in the arbitrariness of the man she had promised to marry, and it left her breathless and bewildered. But she was blindly in love with Picard, and whatever he said to her had the weight of an imperial mandate.

In matters of domestic economy, and of social relations, and of the immaterial details of life he absorbed her views without protest; but when it came to the vital matters upon which their present and their future welfare was based he held firm to his belief that any woman, even Bertha, and, perhaps, especially Bertha, because he knew her better than he had known any other woman, was essentially incapable of any sound decision. Already she knew him more accurately than he had ever known himself, and she could have administered his affairs, and the affairs of twenty others like him, without apparent effort and with exceptional results, but Picard wanted the best executive secretary in New York to be a helpless bride, and she loved him enough to make herself as helpless and dependent as she possibly could.

So he left the stage and became customers' man in a curb brokerage house. At the same time he took Bertha, so glorified that when she was alone she still found ecstasy in repeating her married name over and over to herself, to a musty, red-plush boarding house in the West Forties. Fortunately, each of them was sufficiently in love with the other to endure, for the sake of their evenings together, the sordid days which their circumstances had prescribed for them. And in the evenings the circumstances didn't matter.

There was a period of readjustment when she learned that Picard didn't like to have her express broad generalities, especially generalities of trade or commerce or human policies, even if he happened to agree with them. If she did, he disagreed anyway. Nor did he like to have her criticize, spontaneously, any of his actions or intentions. At first, in spite of her worship of him, she resented these little obstinate traits, and once or twice she even cried over them, but in the course of time she learned, as every clever woman does, that she had married a boy's heart in a man's body.

There came to call upon him at the boarding house one evening a wizened undersized Jew in remarkably misfit clothing. Picard took him to the farther end of the red-plush parlor, and there they sat and argued back and forth for the major portion of an hour. Bertha couldn't hear all that they were talking about, but she was hypnotized by what she did hear, and by the facile emphasis of the Jew's two hands. He stimulated her imagination; and presently, when she had noted his dramatic repression, and his virile intensity and the light in his eager eyes, her curiosity went far ahead of her imagination. Out of long practice she catalogued him and analyzed him to a fine degree and as soon as he had gone, she demanded of Picard an explanation, a history.

"Why," said Picard, "that's a man by the name of Schoenstein. He blew into the office a couple of days ago—wanted us to float a little issue of stock for him. He owns some oil leases in Oklahoma. I guess it's all right, but I told him it was too small to bother with, so he's been trying to get me to loan him some money, so he can go ahead with his development."

Bertha hesitated. "Were you thinking about it, Stuart?" she asked, dubiously.

Picard had been on the verge of a negative decision; but at the implied criticism from his wife, he instinctively held up his head.

"Yes, I'd thought about it."

"How much does he want?"

"Five hundred."

She saw that he was annoyed, but she knew that the evening was momentous. "On what security, Stuart?"

"Note," he said brusquely, and he got up, and began to pace the floor. "He'll get indorsements. And he'll give me a sixteenth interest in the property as a bonus."

When she closed her eyes she could see the Jew and hear his voice as clearly as though he were present before her, and out of her stern training, and her insight, and her native keenness, she knew what manner of man he was. She would have risked her life on her intuition. "Suppose he doesn't happen to be honest, Stuart? Suppose the well isn't any good. Have we five hundred dollars to lose?"

"We've got five hundred," he said shortly."

"But part of it was mine, Stuart."

Picard stopped short. "Now, listen to me, darling. You're the sweetest thing alive, but you don't know the first simple thing about this kind of business. I'm perfectly capable of deciding whether it's a good thing to do, or not."

She perceived the crisis, and met it. "What is it you want to be—a philanthropist?"

"Let's not discuss it, please," said Picard.

On the following afternoon he told her that he had loaned money to the Jew. "I've got security for the loan," he said, "and if the well comes through—that's velvet. And he's paying me 7 per cent against the savings bank's 5. If I'd taken your advice, I'd have lost a mighty good investment."

* * * *

BERTHA was wise enough to make no further protest, and, more than that, she was wise enough to make no protest when Picard, somewhat later, cried out to her: "I told you so!" The note was paid before maturity, and the well poured into Picard's lap a hundred dollars a day for four ecstatic months. Overnight he added immeasurably to his poise and to his air of conquest.

"I suppose," said Bertha, reflectively, "we might be looking for an apartment now."

Picard blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "I had a funny experience today," he said, with apparent irrelevance. "I went over to the Lambs for lunch. There was a pretty big man there I used to know, and we got to talking. He wanted to know what I'd been doing, and I said I'd been resting. He seemed awfully interested in my tailor and all that sort of thing. Well, the upshot of it all was that he offered me a part in a new play of his—at three hundred."

Bertha was deeply animated. "Isn't that wonderful? The right thing at last! Oh, Stuart, I'm so pleased! When do you start?"

Picard regarded her over his cigar. "I've had a queerer offer yet. California. In the pictures. Not acting—directing. Of course, I'm flattered, but it's a ridiculous thing; no salary at all, or a purely nominal one, for a year, and then if I make good, a salary and a percentage."

She caught her breath. "That is ridiculous, isn't it?"

Picard blinked. "I didn't mean 'ridiculous' exactly—I meant unusual."

"That's what I meant, too. Why, you don't know anything at all about pictures."

"I'm not sure I'd say that I don't know anything about pictures, honey."

"But you've never been in them, dear. And you don't know anything about lighting, or photography, or acting . . . Oh, now, darling; I didn't mean it to sound like that——"

"Don't worry," said Picard, with a pained smile. "Better critics than you are have said rough things about my acting. But when they come to me and offer me three hundred flat——"

"Without taking any chances at all!"

"Surely. And a guarantee."

"'And a guarantee,'" echoed Bertha, jubilantly. "And those silly picture people—why, all they're trying to do is to get a year's work out of you for nothing."

Picard began to fidget. "I'd hardly say that. It's a rather sweeping statement for an outsider to make."

"Outsider?" She laughed a little. "I know you don't think a great deal of my judgment, but Mr. Benham——"

"Oh, hang Mr. Benham!" said Picard. "Yes, I am annoyed. . . . And a director doesn't have to know anything about lighting, or acting, or photography, either. All he's got to know is how to tell a story—how to get the continuity. I'm a little

(Continued on Seventh Page.)

"BERTHA," HE SAID, UNSTEADILY, "I'M BROKE, AND TIRED OUT AND DISCOURAGED—BUT WON'T YOU PLEASE MARRY ME, ANYWAY?"